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What a ride these past few months! I have been telling friends that I have felt *nearly* overwhelmed with it all. Nearly yes, but not quite over the top. And it feels like things are now leaning just a bit toward a more balanced life.

I must admit, for a while I simply gave up any expectation of rhythm. I have not worked at anything full-time since my painting days back in 1987. Yet for the past few months I have worked *overtime* volunteering with The Shepherd's Hand, Montrose's [only] local unhoused resource center. I worked the front desk, greeting people as they arrived for meals and asked for clothing or showers. I interviewed people and explored opportunities for people to find housing, employment, and much more. I delivered water and compassion to folks living out in the country in the winter. I cried when I heard people's life stories. I interviewed, and then hired, new employees. I led devotions and directed board meetings. I made presentations with local pastors and pleaded with the city council.

And I am overjoyed to say that The Shepherd's Hand is alive and well today, offering care for body, soul, and spirit. The irony has not escaped me that I would write both *Deep and Wide* and an edited version of *The Journal of John Woolman* one year, and find myself immersed in the experience of local socio-political/compassionate engagement the next. Indeed, in *Deep and Wide* I wrote specifically about the story of Antony, a pioneer of monastic life, who left his isolated desert cave on occasion to be involved in the local political scene in Alexandria. My prayer these days is to have the wisdom of Antony – to know when to go down

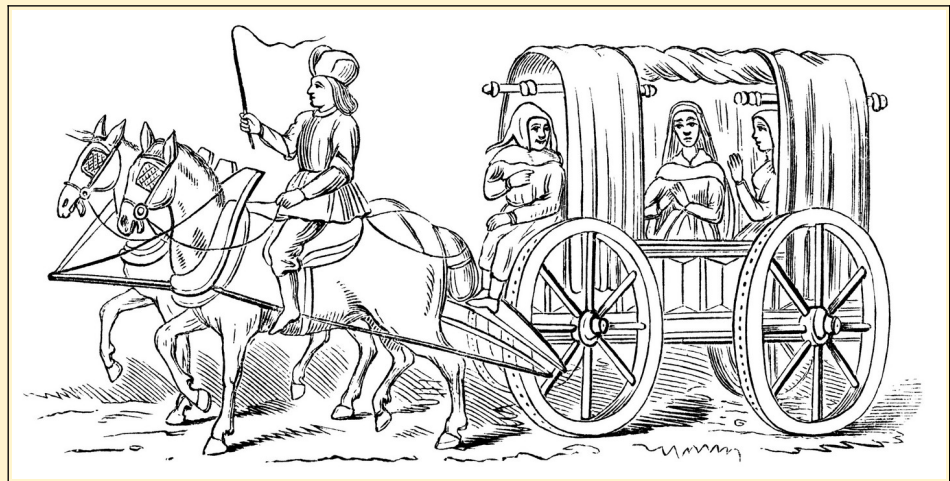


and leave the comfortable cave, to know what to do when one is engaged in the world, and then to know when and how to go back up to the cave again.

In the midst of all this, I have also tried to keep one hand on the plough at Spirituality Shoppe. In November I traveled to Calgary, Alberta, in Canada to lead a pastor's retreat on vocation. I reworked the material I presented last June for inquirers visiting Trinity Anglican Seminary to suit a group of ordained men and women. It worked. Indeed, I wonder if there is not a place for something in my future regarding the topic of Christian vocation. We shall see.

I flew from Calgary to San Diego and attended the meetings of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. The gatherings were encouraging and I had a very fruitful discussion with the publishers at Eedrdmans about my dream project of *An Ecumenical Theology of Consecrated Life*. More recently I have traveled nearby to Ouray, with my daughter Claire, to offer a presentation on local "homelessness," and to Denver, with my wife Cheri, to speak at a church about praying the Scriptures (they were using my book as an adult education text). It is so nice to be sharing ministry with family. As you will hear more in future NewsLetters, Cheri and I are scheduled to minister together in a few venues in northern Norway in October. How exotic!

I have been writing. I finished the *Christianity Today* article which was published in the Jan-Feb issue under the title "Living Like a Monk in the Age of Fast Living." I also have written a chapter



entitled "Healthy Greenhouses and Fresh Saplings: Contemporary Monastic Experiments as Vehicles of Christian Formation." for a yet-to-be published book. I published a book review of N. T. Wright's *Into the Heart of Romans*, a superb commentary on Romans chapter 8, and one of the most significant books I read in 2024. And I also read and just this week wrote an endorsement of Lakshmi Piette's *Dwelling Places*, a lovely survey of communities in the UK. The book is not yet published, but much of her work can be found in her well-known *Dwelling Place* podcast. I have a parade of writings to complete in the months ahead.

And, as you can imagine, I can't live without reading. I have really enjoyed my studies lately. I have been reading works about sociology as it bears on issues of monasticism and the consecrated life (social movements, alternative communities, sociology of religion, social networks, and so on). I went back to my work on Charles S. Peirce and updated—and re-inspired—myself on his thought. I read about the history and current state of Russian and Ethiopian monasticism. I am now making a collection of the “Rules of Life,” “covenants,” and other agreements of various contemporary communities and groups. All of these efforts, as you might imagine, are leading toward the production of *An Ecumenical Theology of Consecrated Life*.

More to come.

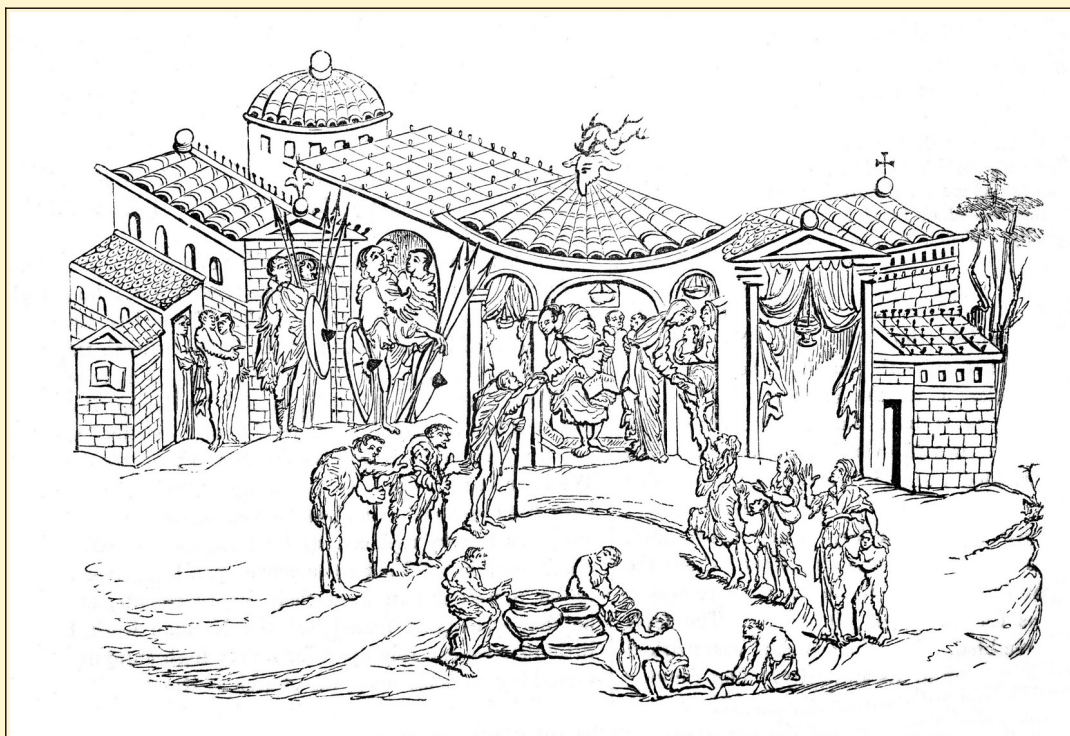
And one day, my world of “monastic studies” and my world of ministry to unhoused folks came together. I had a meeting with a local pastor whose congregation has been welcoming unhoused folks on their property. We got to talking about long-term investments and I decided to offer him a dream: help folks achieve sobriety and new life through participating in monastic life.



Reflections: Monastery as Recovery

What does it take for a person to overcome chronic and severe substance abuse, especially when this abuse is accompanied by a traumatic past, and little family or economic support? I have been pondering this question a great deal lately. It is easy to proclaim, “they just need Jesus”; indeed, I have known a few who experienced miraculous deliverance. But they are few. Thus, just as I believe that appropriate spiritual disciplines facilitate godly transformation, so I also believe that appropriate structures, practices and relationships facilitate recovery. But *what* relationships and practices? Structured *how* and *where*? Needless to say, it's complicated. My aim here is not to offer the latest research on substance abuse and mental health therapy. I just want to share what I have noticed about the mix of elements that foster healthy recovery.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a *community of care*. Alcoholics Anonymous has emphasized this for nearly a century. I think of the man here who overdosed and would have died had he not been staying in an encampment with others who were watching over him. Or the woman who needed to leave that encampment in order to be away from temptation and was welcomed by Christians into backyard trailers. One friend takes another friend night after night to recovery meetings because they know what it is like to be alone at this stage of things. Love is an investment. An investment a community makes because they must, even when the returns on the investment are uncertain.



Yet the community cares, not merely with empathetic acceptance (though this is important), but also an aim of *formation*. I love you for who you are, but I also want to see you change, partly because I know that you, too—when you are at your best—want change. So sometimes I get tough. Of course this gets messy at times, but the point is that *care* and *formation*, blended in the right proportion, are a valuable asset towards healthy recovery.

In practice this means that a community needs a certain degree of *oversight*. Not too much, but not too little either. I think of the encampment a local church here is hosting. Residents of this small “tent village” are interviewed by members of the church and the unhoused group before they are permitted to stay. Guests are allowed, but within limits. People can unpack their bags, but they can’t create trash piles. They have to clean up after their dogs. I know tiny home villages in other cities

where the rules are so restrictive that the site borders on incarceration. But I have also seen “self-governing” communities that have collapsed for lack of oversight.



I consider it valuable when people have an opportunity to both *receive and give*. Again and again I encounter unhoused guests at our facility sweeping the sidewalk, shoveling snow, washing dishes. “I want to give back,” they say. I have watched unhoused friends give up their tent for someone else in greater need. Sure, there are those who feel “entitled” and who gripe when they don’t receive just what they want. But I think that giving promotes recovery.

And when all of this achieves a degree of *stability*, then we are really getting somewhere. When the necessity of moving from site to site (due to police pressure, internal conflicts, or

economic vulnerability) is addressed, people settle down and actually have, in time, the opportunity to imagine what a better life might look like. People begin to think about sobriety, contact their families, and apply for jobs. Stability and recovery go hand in hand.

Along with stability, I would like to argue for the value of *rhythm*. Yes, “working the program” of self-care. But along with this there is a place for times of learning, times of prayer, times of good hard work. Many recovery centers intentionally make use of a blend of activities as a means of fostering recovery itself. Recovery is a process of re-grounding ourselves: in our communities, in our bodies, in our location, and in our minds.

But don’t get me wrong. I would never want to say that the goal of “recovery” for my unhoused friends is a successful pursuit of the middle-class American dream. Indeed, if you know Cheri and I well enough, you know that our own pursuit has been toward a distinctly *alternative* vision of the meaning of “work” and rhythm. And I know many—housed and unhoused—who share a similar alternative vision. Again, it’s complicated. Cheri and I made our choices out of a context of economic and educational privilege. For others, a step of upward mobility may be the most important step of their lives. The point I am making here is that recovery is not simply a matter of personal improvement, but

I could go on and on about this (see my website on Old Monastic Wisdom for New Monastic People). Let me just summarize.

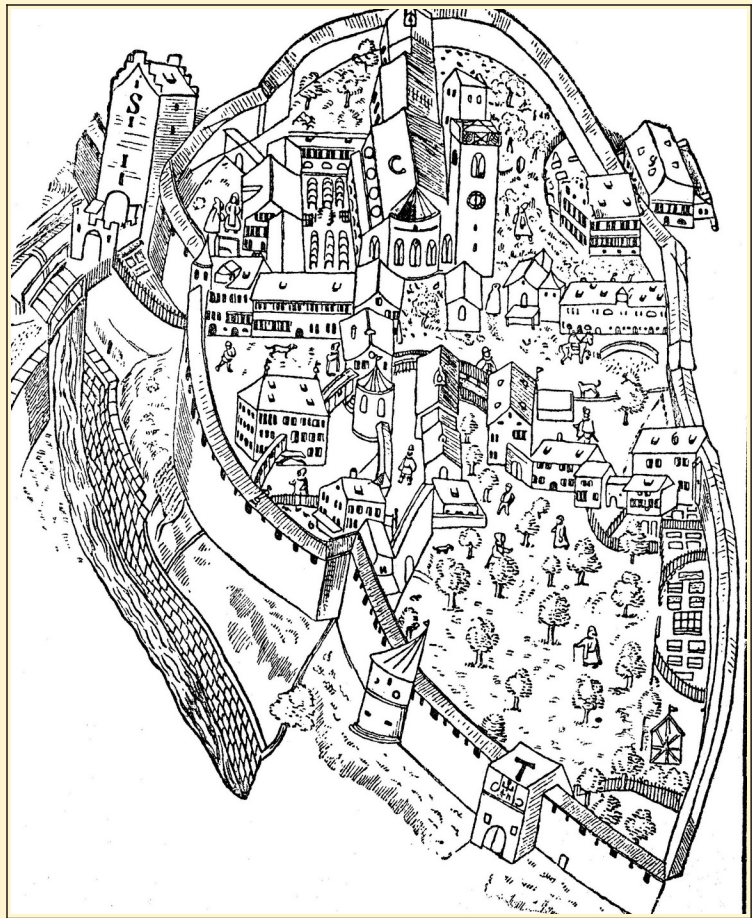
Monasteries are meant to be communities of care and formation. The Rules of Sts. Basil and Augustine are explicit about their aim of monastic life as a vehicle for people to learn to live the great commandments of loving God and one another. The Prologue to the Rule of Benedict identifies their community as a “school for the Lord’s service.”

Nuns and monks—the residents of monasteries—both receive and give.

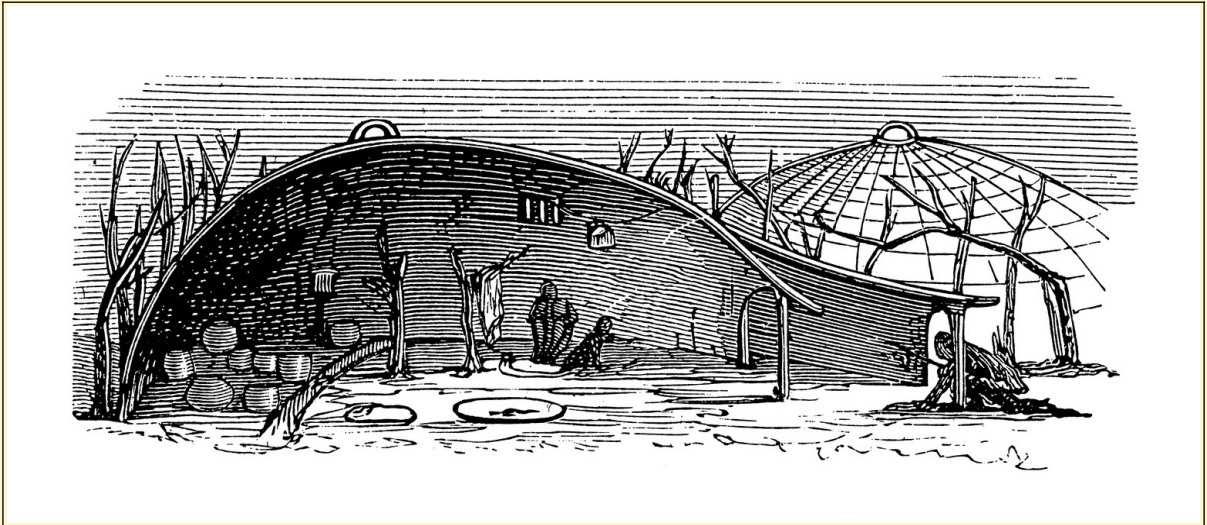
They live together, eat together, and work together for the benefit of the whole. There is an entire literature in the monastic world about how to welcome the weaknesses of one another. When a monastery is at its best, we confess our faults, offer our strengths, and find our identities as individuals, but also as individuals within something larger.

This “something larger” is expressed in the [Christian] values and the structures which govern the oversight of the community. The monastic world often speaks here about a *Rule of Life*. Anabaptist communities often speak of an *Ordnung*. Rules, covenants and the like mediate between values and practice. They articulate how lines of oversight will be embodied. These foundational statements also often articulate their own particular way of seeing—and living—an alternative relationship with the larger society. And as they get worked out in particular groups (through customs and constitutions), these broader values are revised to fit the conditions of each group.

Rules of Life give rise to ways of life: stability, common rhythms and practices, and a lifetime of mutually supportive relationships designed to foster the discipleship of the members and the witness of the gospel in the world. This is recovery: as narrow and as broad as it gets. And, by the way, monasteries are affordable :) They only cost whatever you have.



There is one more thing I must say in order for me to make my point here. Monasteries—or Anabaptist communities or Christian recovery communes or whatever—are not simply “the past.” They are also “present” and “future.”



I know groups alive today who—simply because they live in community—have the social and emotional bandwidth to absorb a few unhoused individuals into their homes. Some welcome addicted and mentally ill persons into membership. I know groups who identify relationship with an unhoused or recovery population as part of their identity. I am seeing people re-vision the past for the sake of the future. I am seeing people experiment into the future with an eye turned toward the past. Recovery of persons, society, and history. Yes, I am convinced. Monasticism can be a powerful vehicle of recovery.

This was the dream I presented to the pastor who is hosting folks on church property. And now I am presenting it to you. I wait to see what he—and you—will do.

May the love of the Father Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all.

By God’s Grace,

Evan B. Howard

Images:

- London Meal – Engraving of morning on the streets of London, a scene from a Victorian era book by Charles Dickens, published circa 1908
- Travel – Carriage of the Fifteenth Century (15th century source)
- Reading - Scholars study at reading desks, from the medieval Hausbuch from the 15th century, Germany

- Community of Care - The extensive residence of an Anglo Saxon Noblemen in 8th Century England. A meeting place with a chapel and community welfare for the local people. From Old England : a pictorial museum of regal, ecclesiastical, municipal, baronial, and popular antiquities by Charles Knight printed 1845
- Washing Dishes: Engraving of a young woman washing dishes at the kitchen sink,, published 1892
- Alternative Society: Antique image from French magazine stock illustration 19th Century,
- Monastery: Monastery of St. Gallen, 1880, woodcut, Switzerland
- Future: "Illustration of a Barolong house. Published in Systematischer Bilder-Atlas zum Conversations-Lexikon, Ikonographische Encyklopaedie der Wissenschaften und Kuenste (Brockhaus Verlaghaus, Germany). A 1875 edition."